

Stopping the Drift: Maintaining Family Connections for Foster Children

By Wilma Friesema, MFT

Too many children who enter foster care experience what's known as "foster care drift"—numerous placements that last days or months, but never long enough for a deep attachment to occur. This often results in serious consequences for the children's brain development, self-esteem, and social relationships. (See Judge Douglas F. Johnson's excellent article, "Babies Cry for Judicial Leadership: Reasonable Efforts for Infants and Toddlers in Foster Care" in *The Judges' Page* newsletter, Oct. 2007.)

In Hawaii, EPIC, Inc. `Ohana Conferencing, in partnership with the Department of Human Services (DHS), the Family Courts, and numerous community agencies, is reducing foster care drift by working to sustain family connections for children in the foster care system. According to a fact sheet entitled: "Is Kinship Care Good for Kids?" (Conway and Hutson, *Center for Law and Social Policy*, March 2007), children in kinship care experience greater stability, have fewer behavioral problems, and have a stronger sense of personal and cultural identity. They also change schools less frequently, have a lower incidence of running away, and have higher reports of feeling loved and happy in their placement.

EPIC offers a variety of programs that encourage family connections. The Keiki Placement Project is one such effort. "Keiki" is the Hawaiian word for child, and the goal of the project is to find the biological, extended family of children age 0-3 as soon as the children enter the foster care system.

This project is new, but having positive results. Isaiah's story is one such example. Isaiah, a newborn, was the child of a young, homeless mom who was doing drugs and getting in fights with her boyfriend. Child Protective Services became involved and partnered with EPIC on the case. EPIC staff began searching for family, but the young mom refused to give any family information because the family had disowned her.

After searching via the internet, phone, and in-person interviews, EPIC staff was able to locate Isaiah's maternal grandparents. As it turned out, they hadn't disowned their daughter; they just didn't want any contact with her boyfriend. Once that was cleared up, the entire extended family was contacted and an `Ohana Conference – a family group decision making process that brings family and social service providers together – was held. As a result of the conference, the grandparents took custody of Isaiah. Mom subsequently entered a drug treatment program and visits Isaiah whenever she can.

While maintaining focus on the keiki, EPIC works with foster youth of all ages to help strengthen their family ties and enhance their stability. Because the transition into adulthood is another significant point of vulnerability for foster youth, two specific programs are available to foster teenagers and young adults.

The first program, `Ohana Connections, is funded by DHS and has a similar goal to the Keiki Placement Project: locate the biological kin of foster youth and assist the youth and appropriate family members to reestablish ties that were broken. "`Ohana," as you may have guessed, means "family," and with the older youth permanency, more than placement, is the driving force. Forming enduring family connections for youth at this stage often requires intensive support services.

Kalena is currently a youth in the program. She was so depressed and angry as a foster child she cracked her head against the wall as a way to vent intense feelings. She entered foster care when she was eight years old and only maintained contact with one sister who was adopted and living on the mainland. The rest of her large family were lost to her until, on one brief afternoon, she saw them at her father's funeral. That sad day was the last contact she had with her relatives until she was introduced to the `Ohana Connections Program seven years later.

Like many foster youth, Kalena harbored fantasies about her family and lived on threads of rumor and information. She'd heard her maternal grandmother had died, her mom was still doing drugs, and her brother was using drugs too. Despite that dismal news, she longed for contact. Every Christmas she prayed her mom would send her a gift, but it never came.

EPIC staff made numerous internet searches and phone calls to locate Kalena's relatives. Meetings were arranged, the first being with the grandmother who had supposedly died. Kalena was shocked to see her. After a shy, "hello grandma," they both cried and melted into each other's arms. Finally, their painful separation was over.

Further meetings included aunts, siblings, cousins, and her mother. It took time and forethought for Kalena to see her mother, but, though she was scared, she knew wanted the meeting. The Hawaiian traditional practice of Ho`oponopono, facilitated by a Queen Liliuokalani's Children Center therapist and Epic staff, was used to support a healing process of truth telling, acceptance, and forgiveness between Kalena and her mom. It was a powerful, transformative experience for them both.

All total, forty-two relatives were located for Kalena, many of whom she saw at a recent family reunion. Kalena no longer feels so angry and depressed: she's on track to graduate, has been accepted into college, and is excited about her future. As she describes it, the pieces of her life are falling into place thanks to the knowledge she's gained about her past and the renewed family ties that are now woven into her safety net.

The second program, E Makua Ana Youth Circles, is funded by DHS and the Geist Foundation. Youth Circles is a youth driven process that empowers youth to clarify their goals and identify supportive people and resources. Its purpose is to help launch the youth into their independence with crucial knowledge and a stronger support base.

Adrian, now age 20, was in and out of Hawaii's foster care system since the age of thirteen. A chronic runaway, he would do what most youth do on the streets: shoplift, smoke pot, and drink. His first Youth Circle was held when he was seventeen, and, he admits, he attended because he heard there was free food. Along with the free food, the Youth Circle provided an array of information about scholarships, housing options, and other supportive services, but, unfortunately, Adrian didn't digest the information as well as the pizza. After he aged out of the foster care system, he ended up in jail for robbery. Once out of jail, he turned to harder drugs until he landed in a drug rehab program.

It was after exiting drug rehab that Adrian had his second Youth Circle. This time he was clear headed and ready. He *wanted* the information and appreciated the structure. EPIC staff wrote

down his plans and goals on paper, which helped Adrian focus on what he really wanted. His support team -- made up of service providers, EPIC staff, family, and friends --clarified specific times, dates, and actions to take to meet crucial deadlines. The team committed their energy and assistance to help Adrian meet his goals.

Today, Adrian is the Vice President of the Hawaii Foster Youth Coalition. He's had five Youth Circles. When he runs into a hurdle he can't get over, he calls EPIC and requests another circle. He likens it to having a coach who helps navigate a difficult playing field that has constantly changing conditions. While Adrian's choices and actions are his responsibility, he no longer feels alone on his journey into adulthood.

In Hawaii, the child welfare system, family courts, and community family service agencies are exerting a concerted and cooperative effort to reduce the pattern of family separation and disconnection that has existed in the foster care system for years. An attitude of respect for the inherent wisdom, love, and care that exists in nearly every family is creating a collaborative atmosphere between services providers and the families of foster youth. Helping foster children stay anchored in their families, while using additional supportive services, has proven to reduce foster care drift and improve the youth's prospects for leading happy and productive lives.